

*Every individual makes a difference. We cannot live through a single day without making an impact on the world around us. And we all have free choice--what sort of difference do we want to make? Do we want to make the world around us a better place? Or not?*

Jane Goodall

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## ***The Power of Influence!***

What you're about to read has been written by some of your fellow Cadets at YOUR United States Air Force Academy. These essays are from-the-heart reflections that the writers hope will help you put your life in perspective, especially while you endure the requirements of this one-of-a-kind institution. I've edited them as little as possible. It's been my honor to know the warriors willing to share their stories with you. I hope you will read them, share them, and share YOUR stories with those you lead in the coming years.

HEIRPOWER!

*bob vásquez*

CMSgt (Ret) Bob Vásquez

USAFA Center for Character Development

# **The Power of Influence**

By Cadet Third Class Gil Valdes

Cadet Squadron 364

It is sometimes hard to understand how much one day, or one act, can affect the path we choose in life. In a time when the tenets of character and integrity are sometimes overshadowed by downright evil acts that pervade today's post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world, the need for influential figures who possess a strong internal compass and a will to do what is right is paramount. Throughout my life, no single event has helped shape and influence the path I have chosen, than a despicable act of terror unleashed upon my home one cloudless September morning. More importantly, the people whose character served as a beacon of hope through all the hate and evil that day are those who continue to help mold my decisions as I travel through life.

In a moment I will never forget, I distinctly remember hearing the sound of United 175 hitting the South Tower of the World Trade Center live on the radio that morning. Minutes later, as I traveled

on the highway towards my home in Queens, the image of those buildings burning just a block from my father's office was summarily seared into my mind. The thought of all that death and destruction just miles away, in my city, where tolerance and respect are the accepted social currency, was truly mind boggling. At the time, I could not see past the horror, the pain, the suffering. I ultimately came to realize how pivotal and important that day would become in shaping our generation.

As 343 of New York City's firefighters raced up the stairs to save those trapped in the infernos above, they put any thought of their own personal safety behind that of the people they served. They made the ultimate sacrifice for the promotion of what is good and right in this world. Likewise, the passengers and crew on United 93, in one of the most heroic feats of our time, saved the lives of countless others on the ground in Washington D.C. by attempting to retake their aircraft. Five of those people, Tom Burnett, Mark Bingham, Jeremy Glick, Todd Beamer, and a USAFA graduate, Major LeRoy Homer, stood out as leaders on that fateful flight. Recently, the third Medal of Honor for service

in the War on Terror was awarded to Lt. Michael Murphy of New York for putting himself under fire to save his team in the mountains of Afghanistan.

These are my heroes. They have inspired me to dedicate my life to that same higher goal: the preservation of good. The hours I have spent thinking about their sacrifices have led me to understand how simple, yet meaningful, that goal is. Every time I visit Ground Zero in New York, pass by the Memorial Wall, or walk the halls of Squadron 31 (Major Homer's former squadron), I am reminded, and humbled to know, that I have the privilege to share in a place that defines their character. Selflessness, I would say, is their defining attribute, and, while so immense, it is something we should all try to emulate. More than any World War I, II or Vietnam hero, those people define our generation. That is a fact we should all take hold of and consider throughout our future careers as officers in the U.S. military – as our character may one day be tested in similar fashion.

Six years following that day, the power of my heroes' influence remains strong. At this school, it is sometimes easy to let cynicism creep into our

everyday routine, but to let that take hold of our will to do something good for this world, as a member of this military, would be a tragedy. These are extremely important times, and we will eventually be in a position to have a real impact on our world's future. Albert Pine stated: "What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others and the world remains and is immortal." That is the main concept I garnered from the events of that day six years ago; it is what I use to remind myself why I am here at the Academy.

If there is anything I hope this essay conveys to you, it is a greater appreciation for the feats good human beings accomplished on that day. In the end, I really do believe it does come down to the simple concept of good versus evil as opposed to a clash of societies or cultures. Anyone who would promote their ideology through an act like September 11<sup>th</sup> clearly meets the definition of evil. Thankfully, civilized society had a few good men and women with exceptional character to meet that challenge up front. Hopefully, this essay will influence you in some small way to continue down the path of service, in a way that would make

those heroes proud. As a New Yorker, American, and simply as a human being, I want to sincerely thank you for your choice to serve, and look forward to joining the fight with you in the coming years.





# **Puddles**

By Cadet Third Class Katie Batchelder

Cadet Squadron 31

The person who influenced me to come to USAFA was an old friend of mine, Kristina, who passed away a few years ago. It wasn't until she passed, however, that I realized how much of an impact people can have on individual lives. She wanted to be a firefighter, like her father, but that fact wasn't revealed to him until the day of her funeral. She was young. She was full of energy and life. She wanted to go everywhere and do everything she could to fill up an entire day, and she hated to rest. She was like a wild mustang, full of spirit and drive. Her yearn to break free overflowed and people noticed.

We played basketball together on a traveling team. My mom was the coach and we always had a blast on road trips. We had three-point shooting contests every practice. She and I would always duke it out until one of us secured our spot as the winner, and then, unsatisfied with losing, we would agree on a rematch. I remember my mom telling

me a story about her at a tournament, when she caught Kristina teaching two little boys how to make spit wads that would stretch to the ground and then back up again, like the little boy, Julian, in the movie *Big Daddy*. Despite how disgusting it was, it made us all laugh hysterically. Simple stories like that make me yearn for new experiences every day, to fully retain the moral values that life gives us, like squishing water out of a sponge. Everything is there, it just takes a little bit of effort to squeeze.

I regret the fact that I didn't really realize how precious life is until I had lost someone, but when I did realize it, a lot of aspects of my life changed for the better. I became closer with my brother and sister. When I took a walk, I didn't just walk to get somewhere. I intently and mindfully looked around, and admired my surroundings, taking in the beauty that I had been missing and not appreciating my entire life. All of those things are things I knew Kristina was now missing out on, and because she did all of those things already, she was able to teach many people how to do them without even knowing what she was teaching.

She taught me that puddles after a rainstorm are not just small pools of water that you should avoid stepping into. They are glowing, reflective miniature lakes right in the middle of the street that you should pounce on, feeling the cool splash on your legs, and watch the drops disperse onto the dry sidewalk. In a brief moment, the drops will dry out. The water will be gone. The refreshing coolness will have turned back into the ambient temperature. The leaves that fall off the trees just before winter aren't solely for raking up and throwing away, they are for playing and throwing. The crackle and crunch under your feet creates a soothing symphony of rustling music, and you should dance to it. You should cover yourself in the colorful dry fallen flakes from the branches, and smell the sweet scent of fall as they cover your face.

Kristina didn't just teach me how to appreciate my surroundings, she taught me to lunge and leap toward my goals, whatever they may be, and however crazy they may be. She knew what she wanted to do. I had no idea. She never had any regrets. I regret not learning from

her sooner. She encompassed exactly what a person should do to fulfill their goals and dreams in life: let loose and run. When I say run, I don't mean run away from something or run toward something. I mean to do what running *means*: letting out bottled-up energy, and creating something tangible, like sweat or distance covered, to give to someone else.

I decided to “run” towards my opportunity to attend the Academy, starting with Prep School. I have made numerous efforts to create something from my intrinsically-stewed-up energy, and pass it on to make something better, whether it is tangible or intangible. Whether or not I succeed or fail has no importance. The only important thing is that I tried.

I believe that I can pass on even more of that energy to my teammates (in the squadron or on a team), both directly and indirectly. To do that, I just have to remember the reasons that I came here, and why I stay, which are: country, family, friends, knowledge, and exploration. We can only hope to influence one another every day, but to do this, we have to remember and make sure to take a

little extra time to leap into the fresh rain-water puddles and dance to the music of the crackle of fallen leaves.



## **A Powerful Mom**

By Cadet Third Class Jason Hallenbeck

Cadet Squadron 20

The person who influenced me the most to come to this institution had to be my mother. Throughout high school I had wanted to be an engineer of some sort and, researching schools, USAFA came up as one of the top schools in the country. My family has had members in every military conflict since the Civil War and both my parents being Chiefs in the Air Force made USAFA seem like a golden opportunity. Being that no member in my family ever finished college, my mother was very proud that I was attempting such a great endeavor.

The summer before my senior year I underwent the usual application process. I was preparing my final essays to hand in to the Academy when suddenly my mother, the one who had been so inspirational to me, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Although breast cancer is often curable, she was diagnosed with a special kind that only 5% of people diagnosed live through.

My applications were sent in and I waited through Christmas to hear word from the Academy. Slowly, all the other schools sent back congratulation letters. The Academy was looking like a good chance. March finally came around and I received a letter from the Academy informing me I didn't get in. Two weeks later, I received a letter from the Falcon Foundation telling me that if I went to a prep school, worked hard, and got good grades, I could get into the Academy.

By that time, the cancer had moved to my mother's brain and she was no longer able to talk. I read the news from the Falcon Foundation to her standing by her bedside. She looked up at me and smiled. That was the last time I saw my mother smile. She passed away a month later. Today I work through the pains of the Academy for her. I remember how proud of me she was.

## **Who has influenced me?**

By Cadet Third Class Harry Dale

Cadet Squadron 36

Many people have asked me, “Who has helped you get so far? Who helped you get through freshman year? Who have you looked up to during your Academy career?” Well, to tell you the truth, the number of people who have influenced me in their small, yet significant, ways are too numerous to count. But there is one person who has influenced me more than anyone, or anything. He is the reason I do what I do every day, despite the various challenges I have faced during my time here at the Academy. He is Jesus Christ.

I grew up in the northwest Bronx. Wasn’t the worst neighborhood to live in but certainly wasn’t the best to grow up in for eighteen years. I certainly have seen the less-than-great side of humanity. I have seen drug abuse, prostitution, murder, muggings and selfishness. Growing up in that environment where those things seldom changed over the years, it was hard to acknowledge that God existed. But then there were those few actions



that reminded us all that there was some hope. The person who stayed in the burning building to ensure his neighbor got out, the person who risked her life by taking down a mugger, or the person who simply held a door open for someone else in need. I didn't know at the time but all those years, Jesus Christ had influenced me with light and love in a world of darkness. How I was able to stay away from the negative influences and still lead my family, while going against the odds to apply to the Academy, could only be explained as God's influence on my life.

When I first arrived at the Prep School, I had it tough. I had made mistakes and people despised me for those mistakes. There were several of my colleagues who wished for me to leave, and had it in their best interest to get me to leave. There were others who tried to find ways to demoralize me through backstabbing. I had the opportunity to seek revenge against those individuals. I had the opportunity to hate. But the love of God had gotten to me. Despite the pressure, in conjunction with the academics and military training, I was able to have a positive outlook. I was able to forgive. God

brought people into my life who would become great friends. The sacrifice God had undergone while he was nailed to a wooden cross was infinitely worse than any suffering I had undergone. But yet, He was able to forgive, and in the process, blessed us all with a miracle. God's love influenced me throughout my Prep School year.

Freshman year, I was once again challenged. I faced the pressure to do the right thing when it came to cheating, working together with former preppies who were now in my squadron who I had not gotten along with, not being cynical, and striving to find motivation to do well. Once again, God worked through me and helped me make the right decisions. Through prayer, people he brought into my life and examples of His grace in the Bible that I happened to read, I was able to come out on top and break out of the chains that tried to hold me down. God's example of excellence was what got me through freshman year, and allowed me to do the right things.

The reason I write all this is not to waste your time. Trust me, if this weren't worth my time, I

wouldn't be writing it. My intent is not to convert anyone to a religion. My intent is not to pressure anyone. Instead, I want to let everyone know the truth about what has influenced me and how it has made my life better, how I have been able to make it through 18 years of hardships and 3 years of Academy life because of one influence that has been greater than all the human influences I have experienced - the influence of Jesus Christ.



## **Character Matters**

By Cadet Third Class Lindsay M. Brown

Cadet Squadron 5

(Cadet Lindsay Brown lost her young life on 21 December 2007 as a result of a car accident. As we mourn her death, we celebrate her life.)

“When times get tough, the tough get going.”

Anonymous

It is important to wake up every day smiling. This is what I strive to do every day at the United States Air Force Academy. A smile will not only make your day better but also that of the people around you. Smiles truly are contagious. The Academy is a premiere institution of learning and character development and I have experienced this first hand.

When I was in middle school, Amy, one of my older teammates, walked onto the pool deck one day with a new hairdo. She had these really cute headbands in and I wanted to get my hair cut like hers so I could wear cute headbands as well. I

asked her why she had cut her hair and she said that she was going to the United States Air Force Academy and she had to for Basic Training. I did not know much about the Academy, but I looked up to her and I knew that I wanted to go there too. I asked her lots of questions about it so that I could learn as much as possible. She ended up leaving the Academy during Basic but that was the first time I had been introduced to the Air Force Academy and if it weren't for her I would not be here today. Amy is not the only reason I attend a small engineering school in the foothills of the Rockies but she did play a significant part in my decision. Once my initial interest was struck on this institution I went to high school and didn't really think much about where I was to go to college, it was just assumed I would go to college. My senior year I began to apply to colleges and I knew I wanted to swim so I applied to Florida State University, the University of North Florida, and the University of Florida. I figured I would just stay in state or attend a small all-girl's school in Georgia. My mother mentioned the Academy to me at the beginning of my senior year and I thought I might

as well apply, so I sent in my preliminary application. I received a letter back from the Academy saying that my test scores were not high enough to meet the standards and that I could re-apply when I brought those scores up. I got discouraged and quit the application process. Then one of my mom's friends who used to work at the Academy, called the swim coach and told him all about me. I received a phone call from the coach to see if I was interested in going there to swim. I said yes. At that point I knew it would be a challenge, a challenge I wanted to take on.

My first visit to the Academy was my recruiting trip. I came "hundred's night weekend" and knew that this was the place for me. I had a blast decorating rooms and hanging out with the girls on the team. While I was on my trip, I found out that I had received an appointment and everything else came together from there. The Academy was going to be a challenge, not so much physically, but academically. I knew this was the school for me because I would be able to start my life on my own two feet and get paid to do it. I was also going to be able to swim. Another huge

benefit to coming here was that it was an amazing education, which was free, and would look good when I graduated. Everyone comes here for something, my reasons might not have been the best but they are the reasons I came and, honestly, they don't really matter. It's not the reasons you come, it's the reasons you stay, that will really influence your character and who you become in the future.

On June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006, I arrived at the Academy for a whole new and different experience than the one I had had on my recruiting trip. The first day of basic was the worst, but, I knew that what I was going through would make me a better person in the long run. The physical demands were what I lived for. I loved running the courses and getting beat in the hallways. Basic was demanding but I knew it would not even compare to the demands I would face when the school year started. I was right in that assumption because, with the long practices I faced at the pool and then the homework, I was exhausted day in and day out. I would fall asleep in class and be exhausted while trying to do my homework. I was athletically

strong, but that was about it. I was horrible at knowledge and school. When progs came I knew it wasn't going to be pretty but I never expected it to be as bad as it was. I had never failed at anything in my life, ever! This was the first time. It really made me think about everything I had been doing. It was like all the failure I had never experienced attacked all at once and from every direction. My poor knowledge test score average and my academics made it so that I could not even travel with the swim team. This attack made a siren go off in my head. I knew I had to change something and I had to change it fast. My 1.0 at progs was not going to allow me to graduate from the Academy. My squadron's impression of me was horrible since I was failing at everything. I perfectly fit the stereotype of a dumb IC and I didn't like being thought of that way at all.

Recovery was a necessity and I did everything I could to make it happen. I focused first on school because I knew that that was what I would be kicked out for if it did not improve. I never knew I could study anymore than I did pre-prog but when I really sat down and started, I realized how



little work I had actually been doing. I also focused on getting more sleep so that I could stay awake in class. I went to countless hours of extra instruction (EI), and I had many teachers helping me to raise my grades. One large influence was Dr. Deans in the chemistry department. He really wanted me to succeed here and I could tell. I would go to chemistry E.I. every other day after class. On the weekends I would not do anything except go to swim practice and study. As horrible as my life might sound it really wasn't that bad because I was learning a lot and I had a goal. True character is found when times get tough and this experience really helped me realize who I am and what I want in life. I finished out the semester with 1.67 and had failed chemistry, so I was scheduled to take the remedial class the following semester moving the second semester of chemistry to the summer. I was never upset that I had to take chemistry again because I knew I didn't completely understand the information and that it would help me in Chemistry 142 as well. The next semester went much better and I began to get extra instruction from the very beginning. I finished that semester with a 2.4

cumulative GPA, a vast improvement over the past semester. It definitely wasn't fun but I pulled myself out of the hole I had dug. As for my knowledge tests, they never drastically improved but when Recognition came I was a team player and helped my classmates. That gave my squadron a new impression of me.

Over the summer I opted to give up leave to take Engineering Mechanics 120 to get it out of the way since I had heard it was a class people struggled with. I did not leave USAFA all summer because I had to take the second chemistry class as well. Another experience most people would hate but I actually had a lot of fun and it was not as bad as many people made it sound. Maybe I just have a very strong sense of discipline and enjoy being miserable but now I am honestly glad I did it, especially when I hear that others are struggling.

My time at USAFA has been a journey uphill in many aspects of my life. I have grown so much physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and as a person. This has been a large part of why I stay. I know that there is a lot of mandatory stuff here that many disagree with, but everything we do

has a purpose and will help us grow into the person we want to be.

The friends I've made here are another big reason I stay, I get sad when I go home and have to leave them and get excited to come back to see them. I do not know that I would have made such an amazing group of friends had I gone to a state school. The Academy has taught me a lot thus far and I am looking forward toward continuing to improve myself. I know I have a lot of growing left to do as a leader, athlete, and human being, but I'm looking forward to the process of becoming who I have always wanted to be.

Character matters, no matter where you are going or where you come from in life. You cannot run from it, for your character will always be with you. Are you becoming the person you want others to see you as and that you want to be?

Remember, when you put your pants on, put your smile on, then everyone will have a GREAT day!

# **A Strong Foundation**

By Cadet Third Class Aaron Volk

Cadet Squadron 18

Just as with any monumental structure, a person of monumental character must start with a solid foundation. You cannot build upon sand that washes away at the first touch of turbulence. For a building to stand firm and weather the elements, it must be built upon something firm that will not allow any disturbance to weaken its integrity. The same principle applies to a cadet who is expected to one day become an officer of the highest moral standard. While the character programs here at The United States Air Force Academy do much to build character in future combat leaders, they cannot do anything unless the person being taught has had at least some exposure to, if not a solid dose of, others who display the utmost in character and integrity.

I consider myself fortunate in that I know I have had a solid foundation prepared in me, on which the Academy can continue to build. My father is in the United States Air Force. He is a

Chief Master Sergeant. Although he never taught me the Core Values outright, now that I know them, I realize that he lived them every day of his life. I have never seen my father struggle with doing the right thing. He never ceases to put the needs of others before him. He strives to continually exceed the standard in everything he does. My father's actions speak volumes to me, and I know that his example is what moves me to internalize integrity, service, and excellence and to always act in a way that proves I am living them.

My father is also the man who introduced me to the United States Air Force Academy. Although I live only an hour away from the Naval Academy and should have been able to make the connection between the Navy having an academy so the Air Force should too, I never knew the Air Force Academy existed until my sophomore year in high school. My number one priority in picking a college to attend was what kind of moral standard was expected of students. That really only left me with the option of following all my friends to Brigham Young University. Fortunately, my father introduced me to the Air Force Academy. When I

learned about the high standards the Academy has across the board, I was instantly convinced. I could not wait to attend an institution where I would be surrounded by those who hold the same standard of good living by making good choices, rather than my peers in high school who “succeeded” by doing anything and everything to get ahead.

With few exceptions, the people here at the Academy have shown me that they value the standards set for them, and I love seeing people realize that life can be lived without taking advantage of a system or other people, and without sacrificing their honor at the expense of short lived happiness.

Every day I am here at the Academy, I thank my God for the opportunity to be here, and for the chance I will have to protect and serve the nation that I love. I also ask Him to help me live in such a way that others will see, by my actions, how much I value the moral standards the Academy is helping us strengthen and reinforce so that we will not falter when the pressure is really on. Rather than running my mouth and hoping people are convinced of my good character and love for our

country, I try to show those things in how I behave.

It is imperative that we here at the United States Air Force Academy live in such a way that others see our dedication to our nation and good character. Whether your reason for coming here was sports, a free education, or what have you, the reason you are still here is thus: We will be leading the forces that guard our nation and our freedoms. We cannot accept anything less than the utmost integrity, or the nation we fight for will no longer trust in, or respect, our ability to protect them.



# **My Parents Are Number One**

By Cadet Third Class Erin Wilson

Cadet Squadron 24

“Life is a series of experiences, each one of which makes us bigger, even though it is hard to realize this. For the world was built to develop character, and we must learn that the setbacks and griefs which we endure help us in our marching onward.” - Henry Ford

Influence, inspiration, guidance, all of those help determine a person's character, and can come from any, and every, type of person and background. Personally, my parents influenced me the most and showed me what characteristics I want to hold above others in my personality. Perseverance, determination, and self-sacrifice are all qualities I learned firsthand from my parents through stories of them growing up and from my own childhood.

My Dad grew up as an only child in a single-parent home. He faced extreme challenges in making it through high school on his own, without



parental advice and control to force him to go and do well. Unfortunately, he was not able to overcome those challenges and dropped out of high school his senior year. He then joined the Navy and was away from home, on his own, at the age of seventeen. After completing basic training, and just beginning his career in the military, he lost his mom at the age of eighteen. Now completely alone, he decided to go back to high school and earn his diploma. He then moved on to a bachelor's degree in engineering, after several years of night school while still on active duty. He continued to work hard and to persevere, even when not given the recognition or promotion he deserved. Finally, his determination paid off and he got his dream job working with the Blue Angels. After that, he made Warrant Officer and then retired.

My Mom, however, has a different background. Adopted into a family with three other siblings, and by caring parents, she was *forced* to excel in high school. Her parents then paid for college, where she spent one year and decided it wasn't right for her. She then left college and

joined the Navy. She spent a few years in the Navy and continued to excel in whatever tasks she was given. Then, she met my Dad, became pregnant with me, and left the Navy. After only a few months after having me, she went back to work. Two years later my sister was born and she did the same thing. Over the next several years, my Dad went off to sea, and my Mom was stuck taking care of both my sister and me by herself, while continuing to go to work. I'm so impressed that she was able to take care of the both of us and work, especially after some of the home videos I've seen.... She worked extremely hard to build her resume and now has an amazing job and definitely proves that hard work can pay off in the end, even without a college degree.

While I admire my parents for the hardships they overcame throughout their lives, I admire them most for what they did for me my middle school and high school years. After my Dad made Warrant Officer, he was stationed in Virginia, somewhere I didn't want to go. I was doing really well in Pensacola and did not want to leave and start all over. My parents then agreed the family

would stay in Pensacola and my Dad would go to Virginia by himself. My Dad spent three years away from us, something I definitely regret now, looking back. My parents sacrificed three years of their marriage just so I wouldn't have to move schools and teams. My Dad missed out on the majority of my high school activities, and my Mom rushed my sister and me to wherever we needed to go. Luckily, my parents are both extremely strong-willed people and survived the time apart. When my Dad came home for good, our family was stronger as a whole. We got along better and enjoyed spending more time together. My parents gave up so much of their time and so many other things to make me happy, and I am forever grateful.

They inspired me to come here, and to join the military. I want to serve my country and to make them proud. I use them as an inspiration to get through any hard times I encounter here, and hope to pass on the same qualities they've shown me to the people around me anywhere I go. They continue to influence me here, even though they live far away. I'm constantly receiving e-mails and

text messages just checking up to see how I'm doing and telling me how much they love me. One of my favorite things is getting a package from home with a letter inside and a quote about adversity, courage, and determination, something that always helps me get through the day and week. My parents will always be my number one influence, lucky me...!



## **Influenced From an Early Age**

By Cadet Third Class Ryne Seeto

Cadet Squadron 39

So, there I was, ten, eleven years old, not really sure. I was with my dad and cousin, and we were on our way to Edwards Air Force Base which is about a five and a half hour drive from San Diego. First a little background.

We were going to Edwards for the air show because my cousin, who is about five years older than I, was a diehard F-22 fan and desperately wanted to be a fighter pilot. He ended up enlisting in the Navy and then going to Annapolis, by the way. He is now a “Nuke” on the USS Jimmy Carter, the Navy’s newest operational submarine.

Anyway, once at Edwards we got our “seats” near the F-22. And as a ten-year-old kid seeing this magnificent aircraft with all the yellow rope around it and all those soldiers with the big machine guns, I was absolutely fascinated. The soldiers were actually Security Forces (SF) and the big machine guns were simply M-16s. I did not know all that at the time.

I started talking to the pilots and was asking really stupid little-kid questions like, “So where does it carry the missiles?” I still remember his name...the Chief Test Pilot, Lt. Col. Paul Metz. I asked enough questions to the point he took me inside the yellow ropes. The SF even kind of moved in to stop him. He took me around the jet explaining how the missiles are carried and launched. He told me that this was the first plane with an all-glass canopy. He even took me back behind the jet to look at the engines and explained the capabilities of thrust vectoring. And told me how it was stealth because of a special paint and the angles. Then he escorted me back to the other side of the rope as I proceeded to bug him with more random questions. I asked him what I had to do to fly one of those babies and he told me to go to the Air Force Academy. I think he started to get annoyed at me because he told me to go check out “another cool airplane, the F-117 Stealth Fighter and talk to their pilots.” And now, a decade later, here I am, a Cadet at the United States Air Force Academy.

As you can see, I was influenced due to my personal attraction, referent power, and look at how it has molded my life!



# **Inspiration**

By Cadet Third Class Michael Wojciechowicz

Cadet Squadron 33

It is all too often in life that we lose perspective of what really matters. The people we idolize tend to be sports stars, famous actors, and, in general, people who we have no tangible connection to. For this reason, it is important to remember who has had a truly major impact in our lives. Generally, those who inspire and mentor us are not rich or powerful, but they are the ones who influence us every day. In my life experience, that person has been my grandmother.

Hedwig Therese Wojciechowicz was born on 13 November 1923, in Poland. She came to America with her parents when she was three years old. My great grandfather, Wacław, gained citizenship for himself and the family by serving as a machine-gunner in the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I. Hedwig's brother and sister are named John and Lottie, respectively, and they were born after the Wojciechowicz family reached the States. She went to college at St. John's



University where she studied nursing, and such was her profession. This core fact about her life displays that her character is one of caring and concern. In an era rife with race riots, where discrimination was prominent, she worked at Mary Immaculate Hospital in Jamaica, Queens. Jamaica was a mostly African-American community. It didn't matter to her what color skin her patients had. All that mattered was that they needed help.

The Wojciechowicz family moved to the house in which my grandmother and great aunt still live in 1951. This house is a testament to family values. In the years after Wacław Wojciechowicz (my grandmother's father) died, any and all relatives who needed a safe-haven, refuge, or just a place to stay, were taken in to one of the three apartments available to live in.

My mother was born on 5 May 1967 when my grandmother was 43 years old. Being a mother at 43 is extraordinary in its own right, and in addition to that, my grandmother was a single parent. At that point in time, the family consisted of my grandmother, mother, great-grandmother, and great-aunt who had returned from a convent for

medical reasons. That unit was a whole until 1978 when my great grandmother, Katharyn, died at age 89.

About a decade later, I was born on 2 Aug 1988. My grandmother quit her job with Pfizer Pharmaceuticals so that she could take care of me while my mother worked. That display of self-sacrifice is another testament to what makes her such a strong woman. I grew up the only child of an only child, but I knew there was always a support structure with my grandmother, great aunt, and mother.

More recently, my grandmother has been through some extraordinary trials and tribulations. In 1998 she fell and dislocated her shoulder and tore her rotator cuff. In her recount of the story she discusses how she reset her broken nose from the fall and then dragged herself into the hallway to call to my great aunt for help. In 2000 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She made a full recovery. In 2002 she suffered a mild stroke but suffered no permanent damage. In October 2007 she had back surgery to relieve a pinched nerve.

She's no worse for the wear and is currently recovering.

At 84 years of age, on 13 November 2007, my grandmother remains a warrior. She has seen the Great Depression, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and all the following and current conflicts. She was standing on a street corner in Brooklyn when the towers fell. She says, "They melted like butter." As a resident of Brooklyn her entire life, she knew this was the first time the war came to us since Pearl Harbor. In an unsettled world, she has always been a rock and a platform of stability for numerous people, including myself. Her courage, fortitude, and self-sacrifice are admirable at the least. Throughout my struggles in life I recall what she has been through, and I think to myself, "*She's the person that makes the good fight worth fighting.*"

## **Discovering Purpose**

By Cadet Third Class Jason Hope

Cadet Squadron 12

I seriously doubt anyone can attribute their success in life to their own abilities. We exist and succeed only as a result of a symbiotic relationship with each other. Furthermore, we were given life and all of our individual talents and abilities by our Creator. How we use those talents and push each other to succeed lies in our hands. You are at this great institution for a reason and though you are bright, you cannot attribute this opportunity to only yourself. Never take the privilege of serving your country for granted.

I never really knew what I wanted to do with my life, much less where I was to go to school. I have always been dissimilar to my peers. Team sports were never attractive to me. Instead, I enjoyed pushing my limits on a skateboard or on an isolated mountain cliff. Thus, the regulated military environment did not seem like a match for me. For some reason, though, the Air Force Academy has always been my first choice for

school. I knew I wanted to go to college and do something unique so I chose the Air Force Academy. I came to the Academy for no good reason. I listened to my classmates ramble on about their higher-than-self motivations for being at this institution, while I had none.

I still do not have one concrete reason to be here. Over time, though, I've developed many. I am here to carry on the legacy of my father, James Hope, class of '78. I would like to earn the proud look I always see in my mother's eye when she talks about her son at USAFA. I am here to protect the liberties that I enjoyed for 18 years before I entered the military. I am here to push my limits and slowly discover who I am and what I am truly capable of. In the process, I am receiving an amazing education, while I work alongside friends who will last a lifetime. My mission is to develop as a person who gives back to his country physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

I did not come to realize my purpose overnight and I am still putting the pieces together. I was not born the "best and brightest", in fact, I often have to work harder than most to achieve a

similar outcome. If it were not for my father, a hero who served his country for twenty five years in the military and continues to serve it today, I would not have found the strength to pursue my highest goals. As we travelled the world with the Air Force, he taught me to make the most of every experience and always believed in me. My father, a warrior who has accomplished so much, is my biggest fan. He made his strength mine and believed in me when I did not, because he knows we can all accomplish great things.

By entering the Air Force Academy-my Academy and your Academy-you and I have already taken the first step to serving our country. We have given up liberties, time with our families, and control over many aspects of our lives. We have responded to a higher calling and may very well meet that calling out on a future battle field where we must be willing to sacrifice our lives. Every day I must remind myself how blessed I truly am to be at this place and how hard I worked to get here. I genuinely believe that the positives greatly outweigh the negatives. Join me in gazing at the

mighty mountains and the clear blue sky as we remember how excellent we truly have it.

Maybe you are like I was-caught in a sort of limbo and not completely sure why you are here or who you truly are. I encourage you to continue to work hard, fight the cynical cancer bred at this institution, and remember that being accepted into USAFA is the first stepping stone into the unimaginable. You will be overwhelmed here, pushed to your limits, and your strength will surely fail you. Lean on those who helped you become who you are now. Trust in your classmates-your brothers in arms. Remember that you have a great purpose in life, though you may not be able to see it yet. Wake up every morning and thank your Creator that you have the privilege to discover your purpose as you serve your great nation.

## **Just a Few Words**

By Cadet Third Class Alec Schwartz

Cadet Squadron 8

This is a rather short story about an individual who influenced me through a very brief and simple gesture. Sometimes that's all it takes. It was spring break of my freshman year at the Academy. I, and several other cadets, were in Texas working with Habitat For Humanity. On one of our last nights there, a few of us were at a party with a bunch of Texas A and M students. I'm still not sure how we ended up at the party. I think it was that some friend of one of the cadets with us had another friend who happened to be putting on a birthday party for another friend of hers. Like I said, I don't know why we were there, but none of us were ready to turn in and there wasn't much else to do that hadn't already been done.

At the party, as should be expected, all of us cadets ended up standing in a relative bunch, occasionally engaging one or two of the local students in a conversation. Typically, the conversation involved a relatively sober cadet (or



completely sober in my case) and a drunken college student who absolutely felt he must impress his opinion of international politics upon us. One of those drunken fellows decided to declare, with the utmost certainty, that he could do more push-ups than any one of us. I was pretty amused by this prospect, mostly because the kid could barely stand, much less orchestrate his muscles to accomplish the task of lifting himself off the ground, but also because I had just gone through Recognition and knew how many pushups I could do. The answer was a lot. Certainly more than the average Joe off the street who had not done hundreds of reps a week in preparation. I decided I would accept his challenge and said so to the cadets around me.

Before I could go up to extend the offer, however, one of the cadets, who shall remain nameless, stopped me. I can't remember his exact wording but the gist of what he said was this: "Doing stuff like that is why people think of cadets as stuck-up and cocky. You can make a much better impression on people if you're humble about it and don't need to prove anything to anyone else."

He didn't say it to be mean, and I knew him well enough at that point to know his intentions were good. It stopped me in my tracks. I didn't have to think about it long to know he was right.

For quite a while after that I reconsidered much of what I was about to do to determine whether I was doing it to showboat or for some legitimate reason. I was embarrassed a bit at the time, but the thought of what he said stuck with me and helped me to become a much more tolerable and humble person (at least I hope so). It didn't take much from him, but he stopped me from coming off as cocky then, and his words continued to do so for quite some time. I think about that event less often now. He was effective and his words sunk in deep enough to take root. He helped me take the first step toward changing who I am for the better.

# **What Leadership Means to Me**

Cadet Second Class Drew Vorhies

Cadet Squadron 6

Leadership is something that is critical in the Air Force. Without it, nothing can be accomplished. What I believe good leadership encompasses is leading by example. You can't expect someone to do something when you cannot do it yourself. When I become an upperclassman, I want to strive to be the kind of leader the Four Degrees respect, because I will lead by example. If they must have their room clean, so will I. If they have to train for an hour, then I will train for an hour.

Another aspect of leadership that I want to possess is trust. Micromanagement is wrong, because it doesn't give the person under you the chance to prove themselves, and take responsibility. Additionally, micromanagement causes a loss of respect, because, for the most part, that person under you is capable of doing a good job, without the need for a commander to breathe down their neck. Using the chain of

command and checking in on them is all good, but not trusting them creates mistrust, and that can be extremely destructive for a squadron, especially in the active duty Air Force.

In closing, I want to be a leader of character and a leader by example. I want to be the kind of leader who the men and women under me respect and would have no problem taking their problems to because I would always be there for them. That is what I believe true leadership is.

That essay was written in September 2005, only a few weeks after I joined this great institution. It has been over two years, and not only do I still believe what I wrote, I practice leading by example. The time is now for my class, the Class of 2009, and me, to lead our Fourth Classmen. I believe in what this institution stands for, and cadets should always remember that someone is always watching their actions, especially the Fourth Classmen. This is our Academy. It's our responsibility to mold them into future officers, so if we cannot lead by example, how can we expect them to become those future officers we expect them to become?

## **Why I Come Back**

Cadet Second Class Joseph R. Tomczak

Cadet Squadron 10

So after our sunburns have faded and the memories of our winter break have been reduced to pictures we've pinned on our desk boards, and once again we've exchanged t-shirts and swim suits for flight suits and camouflage, there still remains the question that every cadet at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs has asked themselves at some point: Why did we come back? Why, after spending two weeks with our family would we return to one of the most demanding lifestyles in the country? After listening to our "friends" who are home from State or Ivy League schools chock full of wisdom about how our war in Iraq is unjust and unworldly, why would we return? And after watching the news and reading the papers that only seem to condemn the military's every mistake and shadow every victory, why would we continue to think it is worth the sacrifice of a normal college life?

Is it because the institution to which we belong is tuition-free? Anyone who claims this has forgotten that we will, by the time we graduate, repay the U.S. taxpayer many times over in blood, sweat, and tears. Is it because the schooling we are receiving is one of the best undergraduate educations in the country? While the quality of the education is second to none, anyone who provides this as a main reason has lost sight of the awesome responsibility that awaits those who are tough enough to graduate and become commissioned officers in the U.S. Air Force.

I come back to the Academy because I want to have the training necessary so that one day I'll have the incredible responsibility of leading the sons and daughters of America in combat. These men and women will never ask about my Academy grade point average, their only concern will be that I have the ability to lead them expertly – I will be humbled to earn their respect.

I come back to the Academy because I want to be the commander who saves lives by

negotiating with Arab leaders...in their own language. I come back to the Academy because, if called upon, I want to be the pilot who flies half way around the world with three mid-air refuelings to send a bomb from 30,000 feet into a basement housing the enemy...through a ventilation shaft two feet wide. For becoming an officer in today's modern Air Force is so much more than just command; it is being a diplomat, a strategist, a communicator, a moral compass, but always a warrior first.

I come back to the Air Force Academy because right now the United States is fighting a global war that is an 'away game' in Iraq – taking the fight to the terrorists. And whether or not we think the terrorists were in Iraq before our invasion, they are unquestionably there now. And if there is any doubt as to whether this is a global war, just ask the people in Amman, in London, in Madrid, in Casablanca, in Riyadh, and in Bali. This war must remain an away game because we have seen what happens when it becomes a home game. I come back to

the Academy because I want to be a part of that fight. I come back to the Academy because I don't want my vacationing family to board a bus in Paris that gets blown away by someone who thinks that it would be a good idea to convert the Western world to Islam. I come back to the Academy because I don't want the woman I love to be the one who dials her last frantic cell phone call while huddled in the back of an airliner with a hundred other people seconds away from slamming into the Capitol building. I come back to the Academy because during my freshman year of high school I sat in a geometry class and watched nineteen terrorists change the course of history live on television. For the first time, every class currently at a U.S. Service Academy made the decision to join *after* the 2001 terror attacks. Some have said that the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan only created more terrorists. I say that the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 created an untold more number of American soldiers. I go to school with 4,000 of them. And that's worth missing more than a few frat parties.



## **A Personal Statement**

Cadet First Class John D. Pavlus

Cadet Squadron 19

The smell of freshly mixed concrete filled the air. The room became cloudy as my father slowly dumped the 65 pound bag of thinset mortar into the water bucket. I made my way through the dusty cloud to my slowly accumulating stack of tile boxes in the corner of the room. I was exhausted. My thirteen-year-old arms could not take it anymore. I was already fatigued and it was only morning. As the boxes became higher, I glanced at my father, who was forty-five years old and had a herniated disc, and watched the sweat bead from his wrinkled forehead down to his callused hands as he vigorously continued to install tile. I remember two thoughts: give up and quit to alleviate my discomfort, or continue with the same self-sacrifice, dedication, and passion that my father has shown and proven throughout his life. I chose the latter and consistently followed his example, which eventually led me to the United States Air Force Academy and the path to becoming a doctor.

The Academy has challenged me as no other institution would. I have had to budget my time among academics, athletics, and a multitude of leadership responsibilities. I was able to apply my father's philosophy as I tested myself and my internal motivation. I pushed myself to the limits and beyond what I thought capable, all the while incorporating our core values: integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. I was able to relate the inspiration of my father with my experience as an Air Force Academy Cadet. Being a cadet has offered me the opportunity to shadow surgeons, lead in command positions, serve the community, and be a part of a team of individuals who have opened my eyes to the healthcare profession, the Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) Team. My most trying time, however, was not at the Academy; it was when I had to leave it.

The phone rings. Mom is crying. Pop had an accident. What was one herniated disc became five. Facing the family's monetary realities, Pop still continued to work on his hands and knees, installing tile despite his agonizing pain. We lacked the income to survive while my father received an

operation and the long recovery period that would follow. At that moment, I saw my father as I did that day when I was thirteen, working so selflessly for the family. I knew what I had to do. I must set aside my dreams of practicing medicine. I had to support my family. Service before self, a credo which I believed was the center to my whole drive to being a physician, placed me in the shoes of my father. I sweated, built up calluses on my hands, and painfully learned what it really meant to be dedicated.

Lance Armstrong once said, “Tough times don’t last, but tough people do.” After my father’s recovery from surgery, I found that I had experienced what most of my peers would be likely to obtain, the notion that dreams never die. I reapplied to the Academy and found myself wandering back through the gates of what I left behind, more dedicated, passionate, and ready to serve. I attacked academics and all the challenges presented with full vigor and perseverance. Research at the Academy has been one of the most exciting and most frustrating experiences that I have encountered, enduring tedious hours to

make standard solutions only to realize that I have made almost an insignificant step toward discovering the truth: a wonderful letdown. Additionally, unexpected challenges have presented themselves in emergency medicine. As a result of my resilience in these adverse circumstances I have been awarded the position of Education and Training Officer for the EMTs at the Academy. With persistence I have realized the rewards that result from hard work and commitment.

Looking ahead, the new challenge of medical school affords me the opportunity to once again test the reality of my father's philosophy and my core values. I retain the desire to have integrity, serve others, and exhibit excellence in all I do. I hope to have the chance to exercise those values while at medical school and as a practicing physician, just as I have with the opportunities presented thus far and the family, and father, I so very much love.